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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 001073

SIPDIS

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TAGS: KDEM PGOV SOCI EFIN EAID HO

SUBJECT: PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF HONDURAN PRIMARIES: LOBO FOR THE NATIONAL PARTY AND SANTOS/VILLEDA FOR THE LIBERAL PARTY

REF: TEGUCIGALPA 1072

Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, Reasons 1.4 (b & d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Honduran voters from the two main parties (National and Liberal) went to the polls November 30 to elect the candidates from their respective parties. The election process was smoothly run, with all observers and the press describing them as a clear success. At this point, they appear to have been the cleanest primaries in Honduran history. Preliminary results, show that Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo won in a landslide in the National Party election and Vice President Elvin Santos' stand-in Mauricio Villeda won a decisive victory over President of the Congress Roberto Micheletti in the Liberal Party election. The Embassy was thoroughly involved in supporting the democratic process through technical support throughout the year to the National Register of Persons (which issues the voter credentials) and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE). The Embassy also provided ten of the 52 international observers under the auspices of the Organization of American States (OAS), which were sent to three departments and visited a total of over 50 polling stations (see reftel). Please see action request para ¶10. End Summary.

¶2. (U) With about eight percent of precincts reporting, (including precincts in the biggest population centers) Lobo had an overwhelming lead, taking 78 percent of votes reported. Mario Canahuati came in a very distant second with 20 percent of the vote. In the Liberal Party, Santos and his stand-in Villeda had a commanding lead with 57 percent of the vote, as compared to Micheletti with 23 and Eduardo Maldonado with 18. As of 8:30 p.m. local time, Canahuati had given a graceful concession speech, but Micheletti had not yet spoken publicly. Results are coming in very quickly thanks to the rapid transmission of election results (TREP) being used by the Honduran Elections Tribunal, which involves "real time" cell phone calls from the individual elections tables to the Tribunal with the complete results for the presidential races. Official results for all races will take some days to report.

¶3. (C) While Micheletti had not yet conceded, we understand that he admitted to intimates that he had lost the campaign.

¶ 4. (U) OAS and local observers are reporting that these elections went extremely well on a technical level. At this point, the elections appear to have been the most transparent in Honduran history. The Embassy was thoroughly involved in supporting the democratic process through technical support throughout the year to the National Register of Persons (which issues the voter credentials) and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE). The rules established by the Elections Tribunal in conjunction with the parties made for a transparent process and included the first-time use of transparent ballot boxes, the TREP quick transmission mechanism, voting at the tables that was open to the public, and election registration lists at the tables that had the photograph of the individual voters to match with their national ID cards. Credit is also due to the Honduran military, which plays a key role in this process, guarding election material, delivering it to the polling centers, providing security at the polls, and then returning official results and all ballots to the TSE.

¶ 5. (SBU) This does not mean there were no hiccups. For example, while the over 5,000 Honduran polling stations (mostly located in schools) were to have opened at 7:00 a.m., our review of over 50 individual stations showed that all opened late, some up to two hours late. This probably explains the TSE's afternoon decision to extend closing time by an hour. Most of our observers reported that voting was extremely light in the morning, but that it picked up substantially in the late afternoon. There were also some

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accusations of irregularities at individual polling stations.

¶ 6. (U) The Ambassador, DCM, and USAID Director spent the day touring electoral sites and meeting with observer groups, as well as receiving a briefing from the Honduran military on its role in delivering and protecting election material. The day started with the military briefing at the Estado Mayor, also attended by the French, German, and Italian ambassadors. Later in the day, OAS Observer Delegation Chief Raul Alconada reported that the election process was going extremely well, He agreed that the Honduran system was impressive and that Honduras, only one of two countries in Latin America that has national primaries (the other being Uruguay), may have lessons to teach many countries in the region. The Embassy team also visited four polling sites, talking with poll workers and votes. The press interviewed the Ambassador a number of times, including a joint interview with the European ambassadors at the Estado Mayor. The Ambassador noted that the Honduran people had the final word and were the true winners in this electoral process.

¶ 7. (U) The Embassy contributed 10 of the OAS' 52 observers who fanned out around the country to make spot checks at a number of polling sites. While only covering a small number of the total sites, the OAS presence helped reassure Hondurans nervous about past elections' irregularities.

¶ 8. Comment: (C) In contrast to Nicaragua, the Honduran primary campaigns were great exercises in democracy. All of the ten candidates represented a wide spectrum of ideological views from the left to the right. There was a high degree of debate and unimpeded campaigning across the country. The process itself appears to have been a model.

¶ 9. (C) Lobo's lead was expected, but the strength shown by the Santos/Villeda team is surprising. Pundits believed that Santos/Villeda was ahead, but had predicted a closer race. Lobo, who ran a strong law and order campaign, is expected to easily unify the party and comes out of the primaries as the favorite for the general elections scheduled for November ¶ 2009. A telling indicator of Pepe's strength is that the National Party easily outpolled the Liberal Party. Santos now has the popular mandate, but will need to bring the Liberal Party together by negotiating the support of both

Zelaya and Micheletti. His huge victory will certainly bolster, but not guarantee, his constitutional claim with the Supreme Court that he be allowed to run (reftel and previous). If Elvin is not allowed to run, Mauricio, the son of great Liberal Party caudillo and President Villeda Morales, will make a strong candidate in his own right. End Comment.

¶10. Action request: Assuming that current trends are correct and that reporting on Monday shows the primaries to have been clean and have produced clear winners, the Embassy recommends that the Department issue a press statement praising the statement. The Embassy will email a proposed draft to WHA/CEN tomorrow.

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